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SYMPOSIUM—CHILD LABOR ON THE STAGE

I.—CHILD LABOR ON THE STAGE

BY MISS JANE ADDAMS,
Hull House, Chicago.

Our child labor law in Illinois does not permit any child under 16 to work between the hours of seven o'clock in the evening and seven the next morning. This, of course, applies to theatres as well as to other places in which a child may engage. And so it comes about that while children between fourteen and sixteen may be engaged in the afternoon performances, no child under sixteen can play at night. Of course, this makes a good deal of confusion when plays come on from New York and other cities in which children are permitted to appear, and arrive in Chicago, and the child is thrown out of commission—if I may use that phrase; and we are continually told that because of this fact, some of the best plays will never be given in Chicago.

We had a very good test the first year the law was in force, when Maude Adams was giving her very justly famous and charming play, "Peter Pan." She came the first night with the children with whom she had been playing in New York. It seemed to us a very crucial moment. The tickets for the first performance had been sold for the benefit of the Children's Hospital Society, a very popular society in Chicago, and a very appealing society, of course. The state factory inspector, however, did his duty, and took the children off; or rather, served notice that if they appeared again the management would be brought into court and fined. The next evening the play went on; it was not taken off the boards, as we had been told it would. Three other young people, over sixteen, to be sure, but appearing very much less than that, went on with the play with great brilliancy and great success. In fact, they were so much nearer the same size with Maude Adams that there were heretics who claimed the play more successfully carried out the illusion which the playwright had intended than had been done in New York with the smaller children.

And so we have gone on challenging one play after another, and almost always the play remains, and almost always it has a long run, and always the audience sees it with the satisfaction of knowing that no child is being sacrificed for its enjoyment.

We hear, of course, in all of this discussion that we are Philistine, that we do not realize that a child must be trained in his art, and that, in permitting no child to appear in Chicago, we are announcing ourselves as a people who do not understand what a wonderful thing dramatic art is.

Now, some of us believe very much in the value of dramatic art, and in the power which the drama has, not only to portray life, but to make us self-conscious in regard to the great things which life is evolving all about us and which we cannot see until they are epitomized and put upon the stage.

But simply because we do thus believe in the social power of the drama, because we are willing to stand by an old statement of Aristotle's that the drama is valuable as a vicarious experience, where things may be tested, where society and the individual may find out the reaction of settled methods and certain modes of living without putting to the test the great, practical concerns of life—simply because of that, we insist that a child must be carefully prepared and must enter the drama as an artist and not as a premature imitator of the manners and tricks which have been taught to it by someone else.

We have schools of dramatic art in Chicago, as New York has and all other large cities. At Hull House, if I may talk shop we have a little theatre in which children appear usually twice a year, in which all sorts of little dramas and festivals are given. But the children giving these are trained as they are trained in music, as they are trained in drawing, as they are trained in any other art which children are taught. And these dramas come as recitals, quite as the recitals and concerts are given by a music school, quite as the school exhibitions of our younger days were given. The child in the meantime lives at home. It goes to school. If it falls back in its school record, it is not permitted to appear in a second drama. It is never permitted to appear again if it seems over-excited or over-stimulated. It is never permitted to appear to excess; and this dramatic art is taught, as other art is taught, as a part of life and the preparation for life which is coming to the child later.

Now, we ask ourselves, why is it that the stage people insist—for there certainly are great artists who do insist—that a child should appear upon the stage prematurely? To my mind, there are two distinct reasons:

First, the child, simply because it is not an artist, breaks through the illusion which the stage is producing and reaches the audience with a certain—shall I say, touch of nature?—to which the audience responds very quickly, especially if the rest of the play is not very good. We like that direct appeal. We say: "How charming the child is! How naturally it does this and that!" And we call it realism. It is not, of course, realism in the sense in which an artist would use that word; it is imitation. But it crosses the footlights; "it gets over," as the theatre people would say, and reaches us. That, of course, is not holding the stage up to its highest artistic possibilities. It is allowing the stage to slump; it is permitting the stage to break through its illusion; whereas, we ought to hold up the stage to an even cast, to that which would make the drama a unit, and give us a unified impression.

Doubtless, the other reason is that the child itself has a certain sense of enjoyment which sometimes reaches the audience. That is true for a little while. It is only true during the first few weeks of a child's life upon the stage. Very quickly the part required of a child is quite as monotonous, is quite as repetitious as the work which a child does in the factory or any other place where no skill is required, but a carefully-taught task is performed over and over again.

Nearly all the children now playing are supplied from certain agencies in New York. It is said, I believe, that eighty-seven per cent of the children who are found in the traveling companies of America are supplied from New York. A child is taught one part. When he grows too old for that part, he is not kept with the troupe, or inducted into another part; because the troupe goes on playing the same play over and over again. He is sent back to New York, and a new child is substituted and taught the same things which the one sent back formerly performed. He is not developed into an artist, because the play is not put on for the development of artists; the play is put on to produce a certain effect at a given moment, and to reproduce itself as long as the public demands it and as long as the box office receipts hold out. And, of course, no one is concerned with the education of the child.

I saw the same play in New York twice this winter, and it was painful to see a little child clambering up a wall in exactly the same way which he had done the week I had seen him before, putting his little foot on exactly the same spot, and going through the same simulacrum of climbing a wall which he had done so many times that he could, of course, do it no other way, and was allowed to do it no other way.

Now, what do we like about children? Is it not, after all, their spontaneity? Is it not the determination of each little soul to express itself and be unlike anybody else which makes individuality? And when a child is too carefully taught to conform, or even when he is prematurely taught, we call him a prig, and we find him uninteresting; we say it is a great pity that this child had been given a pattern before we saw what was his real object, or his real contribution to life. So we say that, from the point of culture, the preserving for life the contribution and gift which each child might make, nothing is much worse than its premature exploitation on the stage.

I was asked this evening to say something about Count Tolstoy, and trying to say something about art here reminds me of a story which, perhaps better than any other story illustrates what we have a right to demand of art in this dreary life of ours.

Tolstoy has a story in which ten men are working in a field, and at the end of the season they divide up the produce of this field to each man according to the amount of work he has expended upon the field. But one day, one of these men wandering to the edge of the field and pulling a reed from out the swamp, finds that he can cut holes in this reed and make musical sounds, that he is, in fact, a musician. The other nine men are so pleased with the sounds of this pipe that they say to him: "We would much rather work harder, all of us, and supply you with food that you may be freed from the work and supply us with this sweet music." And so the man is freed from his labor, and he plays to the others as they are tilling the soil.

Tolstoy says that is a perfectly fair exchange; they give him food and he gives them that which lifts their minds from the harshness and roughness of their task, which gives them a sense of beauty in the world, and delights their hearts.

And then he says that this artist, having the artistic temperament, and concluding that he is not being appreciated, puts his pipe under his arm and goes to the city. I think he has him go to Paris, and there he joins an orchestra, and they all play together, and they go down very low, and they go up very high, and they do very remarkable things in a musical way. And the audiences who come to listen are not people who labor, for the most part; they come because they think it is a cultivated thing to hear good music, or they want to write articles about it, or they want to go to an afternoon tea and tell somebody else that they have heard this music; for all sorts of reasons they come and listen. And because they listen from these queer reasons, the musicians begin to think only of their technique, they begin to try to do things that will dazzle the audience, that will bewilder them and mystify them.

And two things happen, Tolstoy says: The first thing that happens is that the people who are laboring are not having this music at all, because they cannot afford to come to hear this orchestra; they are working for a living in the shoe factories, the mills, the sweatshops, toiling through long hours without the pleasure which music might give them. And when they want that pleasure, they go to low music halls and get that which appeals to their sensuous natures, or at least that which does not uplift their minds. And then the fine people who come to listen to the orchestra, say to each other, "See, what the common people are; they like low down music; they don't like such fine music as we appreciate." And the orchestra, on the other hand, because it is not ministering to the people who labor, because it is not trying to perform the function of art, they, too, become very queer and difficult to understand, far away from that simple art which when fostered has always been a help; the art which Homer represented when he sang to the people of Greece and put into beautiful form the old stories of which they were all so proud; the sort of art which Cimabue represented when he came down from the mountainside and carried the picture of the Madonna through the streets of Florence, and all the people followed him and felt their religious life was being expressed by this gracious mother and child; the sort of art which Wagner expressed when he tried to unite the German Empire by going back into the old folk tales and saying, "These belong to all of us; we will synchronize them; we will bring them together; and through them we will express this new national life."

And so Tolstoy says this thing has happened to art, that because real art can only come at the moment when it is trying to express the life of the people, after that moment is passed we imitate it, we serve it up over and over again. The people who labor, bereft of this art which they ought to have, get farther and farther away from solace, harder in their lives and duller in their purposes.

Many of us believe that the drama is a great art, that the power of the stage is so great and popular, that even the five-cent theatre is almost becoming a national institution. I believe there are two and a half million people every twenty-four hours who go to a nickel show of some sort in the United States. They go, fathers and mothers and little children. What they see there more or less forms their moral purposes, or at least it expresses their longings for the heroic of life, their romantic cravings for all of those things which lie outside the humdrum. It is because we believe this art is so great and so powerful, even in its humblest manifestations at the nickel show, that we would preserve it for our national life, that we would keep away from it those who are too young to understand what it means, who are caught by the lack of restraint which art always exhibits, who fall in the snares which are always spread out for the young in such places.

And we would say, let us have as fast as we can a national drama in America; but let us have a drama presented by mature men and women, with their powers trained, with their outlook on life moralized; and then let us meet it from the side of the audience with a demand that it shall be sustained and worthy of our national life, and that it shall not be crowded and put before us prematurely, and that the young shall not be sacrificed that we may have a Roman holiday.

II.—CHILD LABOR AS RELATED TO THE STAGE

BY HENRY BAIRD FAVILL, M.D.

Chicago.

In discussing the broad topic of child labor, it is desirable to bear in mind that we are dealing with a subject, the positive side of which is a matter of economics, the outgrowth of industrial conditions in which the moving factors have been to a large extent matters of apparent necessity.

On the negative side of this question are arrayed considerations humanitarian, sentimental, and for the most part beyond any question conservative. It is almost universally true that under such conditions the material factors represented in a system which has become fixed, have a stability and lack of elasticity that makes gradual and carefully studied reform extremely difficult.

On the other hand, it is true that propaganda looking toward abatement of conditions which are regarded as pernicious, proceed upon lines of feeling and denunciation not always tempered by calm consideration, either of the conditions or of the circumstances through which conditions have been evolved.

Of course, this is tantamount to arguing that this subject should be approached calmly, fairly, and with full knowledge of the facts. It is especially true of the child labor problem that this sort of scrutiny should be applied by all concerned.

A priori, it is hardly to be disputed that strenuous labor is for children an undesirable thing.

It is probably just as true that much of the schooling of children who are not called upon to work is undesirable, and for very much the same reasons. Yet to the school we are so accustomed, and to its undesirable features we are so obtuse, that there is hardly a voice raised in an aggressive way looking to the remedy of conditions which are stupid and distinctly damaging. The fact, however, that the alternative of school life for children is open to grievous objection, should absolutely have no weight in discussing child life as related to industrial conditions. Our problem involves no balancing

and disposing of all social contingencies. Progress is not made that way. The problem before this organization is that of weighing upon merit the advantages and disadvantages in child labor and defining as accurately as may be the territories of safety and desirability. So, when I approach this question of the effect upon the physique of children of any pronounced form of continuous labor, I shall approach it without reference to the great mass of shifting and complicating social alternatives, and upon the distinct ground of physiologic and psychologic values.

There was a time when medical men and physiologists were disposed to regard the problems of childhood as the problems of mature persons in miniature. It is not very long since this view has been recognized as fallacious, and we are, therefore, not in possession of abundant facts from which to propound unquestionable principles of child development.

There is, however, an abundance of knowledge at our hand to justify emphatic expression upon many phases of this question.

It is most valuable in analyzing the subject, to consider, with the notion clearly defined, that youth is the period of growth and formative activity, and that mature life is a period of fixed and relatively inactive growth processes. Immediately arises the question, how much more can a young animal be expected to do with his machinery of nutrition than merely to grow and maintain a proper physiologic balance? We know that in isolated instances prodigious feats can be accomplished by young animals and by young humans, feats of mind and feats of body, but that is in no sense an answer to the question. With human beings the question is not as to what the young can do, but what they can appropriately do with respect to the many years of life it is hoped they will endure.

Upon that basis it is safe to say that there is a point at which expenditure of energy through voluntary activities is in ideal adjustment to those processes of nutrition and growth which we consider distinctly vegetative. Expenditure of energy beyond this point is at the expense of proper growth. Effort below this point is as plainly, but perhaps not so seriously unfavorable to development.

There can be no doubt that this point varies in different individuals, and that there is hence great difficulty in determining for children in masses fixed lines within which they shall all travel.

Educators are coming to see this, and the process of differentia-

tion in educational matters is becoming a matter of close investigation. This applies not only to the curriculum of school, but applies and will still more apply to physical conditions under which school children live.

The principle which is gradually being evolved in educational matters is this: that there shall be an elasticity in school curricula, which shall enable the various degrees of mental and physical capacity to find proper measure and accommodation.

Through it all runs distinct recognition of the fact that the tendency of school is to over-confine, and over-restrict, and more or less over-work the young child. If that principle is sound, as applied to school life with its comparative latitude, short hours and desultory character, why should it not be invoked to determine what is proper as to labor for children?

The question admits of no argument.

As a human proposition, it is far more important that the factory be estimated upon this basis than that the school should be. As a practical proposition, nobody can question that the effect of long hours, rigid duties, sustained effort, and more or less bad hygienic conditions which prevail of necessity in industrial pursuits, are damaging to the physical welfare of the individual child. If damaging to the physical welfare, there is equally no question that it is limiting to the mental development and perversive of the moral development to a greater or less extent.

Let us grant, for the sake of extreme fairness, that teaching a child dexterity, industry and responsibility has a value. Can any honest mind doubt that these alleged advantages are more than offset by teaching it the dexterity of an automaton, the industry of a driven slave and the responsibility of a premature burden-bearer?

These are matters to be discussed, not in terms of scientific definition or of physiologic abstractions; they are to be discussed in the light of common sense with the evidence open to any honest mind. Let any adult consider the effect upon himself of prolonged, tense, exacting labor, particularly with reference to his reserve supply of nervous energy, at the expiration of his day. Let him then ponder upon the status of a child, called upon for relatively the same kind of expenditure, in the light of the fact that that child needs for his formative processes many times the nervous

energy which the adult needs. The conclusion is unavoidable, that there is in our most aggravated trade conditions a relative imposition upon the child far greater than upon the adult.

The damage to the child is primarily in the inroads upon his nervous system, the robbery of his vegetative life to supply his voluntary activities. The effects of this demand are remote, because operating through a long series of defective nutritive processes which find their expression years hence in failure of development on the one hand, or exhaustion of nervous resources upon the other. Is there any lack of facts to substantiate all of this picture of demoralization?

The facts are too simple of demonstration to need argument at this date, and yet, the question may fairly be asked, are these evils equally true of all forms of child labor? Are we not trying to generalize too broadly and to dogmatize too definitely about matters which have strong specific differences?

This question is asked in many directions by those who see less clearly than we the undesirability of child exploitation.

I am disposed to agree with those who argue that all fields in which children are employed are not equally objectionable. It would be idle to argue that there are not differences in degree of undesirability in various pursuits and it is fair to discuss whether some of the employments of children have not enough advantage to offset the disadvantage.

This brings us to the immediate subject in hand; the question of employing children upon the stage. It is pointed out that the tendency of stage training for children is in the direction of education, refinement and general elevation of level; that of necessity they are cared for physically; that their usefulness depends upon a certain degree of culture; that their pursuits are of a pleasure-giving quality as compared with industrial pursuits, and that above all their economic usefulness as wage-earners is far beyond that of ordinary child laborers.

In support of this can be cited several well-known examples of people brought up from childhood on the stage who have achieved great personal worth and public importance. Supposing that all that is alleged to be of advantage to children upon the stage is true, does it carry conviction as to the desirability in general of that life for the young?

It may be true that children who are to be employed upon the stage will be physically somewhat cared for; that they will be comfortable and perhaps live in relative luxury, as compared with what they might have had otherwise. Let us assume that it is so. Does it imply any physical advantage in the end? Obviously not the least, unless there can be associated with it definite hygienic living, such as will offset the perversion of natural habits incident to the hours of employment and the pampering influence of comforts which are devoid of the elements which tend to build up vigorous bodies, and also some sort of mental or moral surrounding tending to mitigate the unfailingly deteriorating effect of luxury, even such meagre luxury as could be implied in this discussion.

I repudiate utterly the notion as to benefit to physique which is thus argued.

It is true that the children in question might have association here and there, with people of somewhat more cultivated type than would be normal to them; that the nature of the calling is such as to evoke some degree of mental response which on the whole would promote intellectual development. When one considers, however, that the culture of the stage is on the whole specious and superficial, and that the stimulus that it affords to the young is that of excitement and imitation, rather than fundamentally cultural, it must be concluded that a view which holds this of great use to the young is very narrow.

To any extent to which it affects children in a stimulating way at all, it does so through the medium of highly strung nervous unnatural appetites and aspirations, false standards and faulty methods which are calculated to ruin the nervous balance, mental poise, and moral unfolding of the average child.

We are prone to attach to the conception of art some mysterious, ennobling quality. Is it true? A fair survey of the field of art, as it is recognized to-day, will absolutely dispose of that contention. Either it is not true at all, or our conception and definition of art has got to be radically corrected, and the field of art enormously restricted. Hence, to create for the child a conception of great privilege, based upon art, as it is now regarded, is to put forth a fictitious situation, empty of real possibility and pregnant with opportunities for permanent damage.

No discussion of child culture has any value that does not take

into account the effect upon character which the life experience offers.

Naturally, people differ as to the qualities most admirable in children, as they differ upon qualities most admirable in men and women. It is for us to advance and maintain such views of character and quality as seem to us most sound.

Is there anything in the realm of childhood more disquieting than precocious sophistication? Consider it not only upon the side of premature knowledge and familiarity with the undesirable phases of life, but consider it in its reflex upon the individual nature.

Consider how impossible it becomes for a child not to acquire that self-consciousness which puts it into strained relationships with nature and with life; the certainty with which simple and outspoken honesty is eliminated and substituted therefor is artificial expression and indirect process. Consider what a child so equipped has to overcome before there can develop foundations of integrity and morality upon which every individual sooner or later has got to build personal character.

Life is bad enough as it is without offering to the young a double distilled essence of mental and emotional poisons such as inevitably inhere in the tense and aggressive work of portraying all phases of human experience in the form of the drama in its present relation to the public.

There is great question as to how far the young, as an audience, should be fed with this material. How enormously aggravated is the damage to a participant!

But, it may be said, We are taking this too seriously; these things are plays, imaginary situations, more or less humdrum to those habituated. Let us see what that means.

Has anyone ever gone behind the scenes, particularly after being impressed by good art upon the stage, and failed to have a wave of depression as he views the utter lack of relation between the portrayals of the stage and the life of the actors? To the mature mind, it is true, there may be possible accommodation of thought whereby art and portrayal may separate themselves automatically from the sordid conditions of stage business, but take it by and large it may be said that if the admiring public could see all of the preliminaries to the most magnificent stage success, nothing but ruin could attend the disillusionment.

This does not at all imply viciousness or any undesirable moral quality. It is a mere matter of psychology, and to those who are trained in stage affairs, doubtless rather a negligible matter, but to the young and impressionable who are building up an experience in life in which they are acquiring standards as to life's realities and values, it cannot fail to be a demoralizing influence.

Not only will its demoralization show in doubtful and uncertain standards, but it will show concretely in the nervous development and expression of the individual. Excitement, ambition, emulation, indiscriminating fascination, all come rolling upon a child in such a way as to overwhelm all but the most exceptional.

If what is at the end of the road were the most desirable thing to attain, this process of attaining it would be too perilous to sanction it. In proportion as that attainment is less ideally desirable, the wrong to childhood involved in exploiting it to this end, proportionately increases.

Can there be an advantage from any point of view strong enough to justify the sacrifice or the risk?

Those who are viewing the welfare of humanity from the standpoint of medical training and particularly illuminated by broad medical experience, are very clear in their belief that progress in human happiness is closely related to health.

The more we know of this subject the more we realize that mental development and balance is not to be separated from other physical questions.

There is reciprocal relation between bodily states and mental states operating through the nervous system that makes the importance of well developed, carefully preserved nerve centers vital. From a medical point of view no influence bearing upon the development of childhood is more important than those which a child encounters in this period of nervous growth. From a scientific or a common observation standpoint, conditions which tend to overstimulate, over-fatigue, and generally unstabilize the nervous system of children are destructive and for the most part, if continued too long, beyond correction.

There can be not the least question from the point of view of those who understand and without prejudice pronounce upon these questions of child evolution, that stage experiences in general are among the most vicious conditions to which children can be

exposed. The whole movement is without the slightest justification from the standpoint of the welfare of the child, and this fact alone should be enough to stigmatize the effort to create an industry for children upon the stage as a social abomination.

III.—CHILD LABOR ON THE STAGE

BY MISS JEAN M. GORDON,
New Orleans, La.

There is no phase of child labor which I have found in my four and a half years' experience as factory inspector in the City of New Orleans so baneful as that of the children of the stage.

We became impressed with the subject of the children in the mill, because we could see those hundreds of little children coming out every evening after a hard day's work. I do not think many of us have realized the enormous growth of the nickel show and the vaudeville theatre, or the number of children employed in them. My work as factory inspector brought me in touch with the theatrical situation in New Orleans. I did not find any talent displayed in the girls that I had to take off the stage. They were simply employed for their physical attractiveness. In my office I have learned from girls of ten and twelve and thirteen years of age, of the low standard of morals taught these young children as part of their stage experience.

The state has said that no girl under twenty-one years of age can have charge of her money. But you allow a little girl of ten years of age to take her moral life in her hand. You may think that this is all very true, but that art is a hard taskmaster, and genius must be given a certain sway. Theatrical people have a great way of talking of the geniuses. I think I am more interested in helping the geniuses along than any of the others, because I fear that those with any real genius in them would soon have it blotted out by the contact with the life they lead.

Furthermore, the idea that plays like "Helena Ritchie" and others of that class cannot be played by adults is erroneous. "Helena Ritchie" was played in New Orleans last year. A woman came to me and said, "What will you do about 'Helena Ritchie'? Are you going to deprive us of seeing such a wonderful play?" I personally am quite willing to give up all these plays if it means that they must use children, but I don't think you have to do it, as was proved in this case.

When I heard "Helena Ritchie" was coming, I called on the manager of the Tulane Theatre, and asked him about the child to take part in the play, and he said, "The child is twenty-three years of age." I knew that as soon as Sunday night was over my telephone would be kept busy telling me that there was a child on the stage, and my first thought was to notify the public, and then I thought, "No, that would spoil the illusion. I will see how many people guess that this child is twenty-three years of age."

I went to see the play, and not a soul in that house ever suspected that that little tot of a creature, with its little thin legs done up in the funniest little white stockings, accentuating the childishness of the form, and a yellow wig that came very much down over the face so as not to show the neck—no one ever suspected that that was a woman of twenty-three years of age, who acted the part infinitely better than any child ever could have acted it, because she could interpret and understand so much better what was expected of her than any child of seven or eight years of age.

Another point always brought out is the need of the wage to the family. Of course, I am bitterly opposed to the idea that the children of men and women should support them. And it is a very significant fact that it is only the human race that lives off the earnings of its young. Charlotte Perkins Gilman has expressed it wonderfully well in a little poem when she says:

"No fledgling scratches for the hen,
No kitten mouses for the cat."

It is only the human family that lives off the earnings and the wages of its own little children.

Now, just at random the other day, I took 356 certificates which had been issued to the children in our office, and out of the 356, I found ten were orphans and 26 fatherless. All the rest of the certificates had been issued to children who had both fathers and mothers. I have found that the "poor widow" is generally at the washtub making great effort to send her boy and girl to school; but it is almost without exception some great, big, fat, lazy man or shiftless woman who has sent the children into the mills and the factories. If it is true that the child is supporting the poor widow, then why cannot we educate the community to recognize the right of the widowed mother to a pension from her state government? If we can pension soldiers, men who have gone forth and killed,

I certainly think we could develop some form of pension for the woman who has tried to supply good citizens to this American Republic.

Furthermore, they tell us that they always take such excellent care of the stage children. Stage children of five and seven years were boarded in a place in New Orleans where, I believe, no respectable parents would care to have their little five- and seven-year-old children stay; going home as they did at half past eleven and twelve o'clock at night.

We have got to face the question. We must recognize that,

"Who for truth no sword uplifteth,

He for error strikes a blow."

And if we are not doing our work, and our share in this work of trying to save the child, then we are on the other side, and are helping to drag down the children of America.